

The Empire and Christianity

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its services to culture and the humanities. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the classics had to be rediscovered and relearned: the dead spirit of humanism had to be quickened to a new birth.

Hard things have been said of Christianity and its influence upon the Roman Empire, harder perhaps than the facts warrant, though the bitterness of many of the critics has been directly provoked by the boundless assumptions of the Christian apologists. Looking back dispassionately upon the period with which we have been dealing, it is not difficult to see why the Church triumphed and why the nations acquiesced as readily as they did in the downfall of paganism. The reason is that the world had grown stale. It had outlived all its old ideals. It was sick of doubt, weary of bloodshed and strife, and nervously apprehensive, we can hardly question, of the cataclysm that was to burst upon the West and submerge it before another century was over. The philosophies were worn out. The gods themselves had grown grey. There was a general atmosphere of numbness and decrepitude. Men wanted consolation and hope. Christianity alone could supply it, and though Christianity itself had lost its early joyousness, freshness, and simplicity, it retained unimpaired its marvellous powers to console. To a world tired of questioning and search it returned an answer for which it claimed the sanction of absolute Truth. The old spirit was not wholly dead. One may see it revive from time to time in the various heresies which split the Church. But it was ruthlessly suppressed, and humanity had to